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# Migrant Ridesharing Drivers in San Francisco: A Case of Blocked Mobility?

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University of San Francisco

Master's Thesis

**Migrant Ridesharing Drivers in San Francisco**

**A Case of Blocked Mobility?**

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*A thesis submitted in fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
in*

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Migrant Ridesharing Drivers in San Francisco  
A Case of Blocked Mobility?

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS  
In  
INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

by Shireen Tofiq  
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UNIVERSITY OF SAN FRANCISCO

Under the guidance and approval of the committee, and approval by all the members, this thesis project has been accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree.

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## Abstract

Migrants have long turned to self-employment in host country labor markets due to not only racial and ethnic prejudices, but also issues of local language proficiency and lack of recognition of the academic degree from the sending country. The taxi industry, one particular occupational niche dominated by migrants, has long been studied by scholars. However, the industry has evolved into a newer and understudied form of transportation: ridesharing. This study argues that in the case of the ridesharing industry, drivers did indeed turn to the occupation because of factors such as insufficient English language level and foreign academic degrees, but also age and personal family matters. Participants were attracted to the ridesharing industry in large part because of the flexibility and level of compensation provided. As a whole, participants saw ridesharing as the best option available to them in an otherwise unsuitable labor market.

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## Introduction

The theory of blocked mobility states that migrants are blocked from upward mobility in host country labor markets due to insufficient local language proficiency and lack of recognition of the academic degree from the sending country, and therefore turn to self-employment. The taxi industry has long been studied as an entrepreneurial occupation dominated by migrants, and yet little has been done on its newer, more popular form: ridesharing. Through in-depth ethnographic research on migrant ridesharing drivers in San Francisco, this study argues that local language proficiency and lack of recognition of academic degrees are indeed factors of job immobility, but also age and family matters. Many of the drivers, all of whom were male, turned to the occupation for its flexibility, ease of entry, and perceived promise of high financial capital. Driver sentiment toward the occupation ranged from appreciation of its freedom to resentment of having turned to it out of necessity. Overall, the participants in this study seemed to view ridesharing as their best option in a labor market in which they have few options.

## Global Migration Trends

The latest available estimates from the International Organization for Migration (IOM) show that in 2015, the number of people residing in a country other than the one in which they were born was the highest ever recorded: 244 million.<sup>1</sup> The United States alone received 46.6 million of these people, accounting for nearly 15% of the total resident population.<sup>2</sup> It is consistently the most popular destination country for international migrants, followed by Germany, the Russian Federation, Saudi Arabia, the United Kingdom, the United Arab Emirates,

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<sup>1</sup> 2015 Global Migration Trends Factsheet. 2017. Ebook. 1st ed. Berlin: International Organization for Migration.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*



Canada, France, Australia, and Spain. The top five countries with international migrants living abroad in 2015 were India, Mexico, the Russian Federation, China, and Bangladesh.<sup>3</sup>

Levels of forced displacement in this year were the highest recorded since World War II, largely due to the conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic.<sup>4</sup> Various regions across the world saw a dramatic increase in the number of refugees, asylees, and internally displaced people, and the high number of voluntary migrants is of equal significance. Between nation-states, the proportion of international migrants varies significantly. Figure 1 on the next page shows a map of the percentage of immigrants in each country of destination around the world.

Figure 1. Share of Immigrants as a Percentage of Total Population of Country of Destination, 2015.

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*



Source: IOM calculations based on UN DESA (International Migrant Stock, 2015), and World Bank, World Development Indicators (country's total population in 2014).

As can be seen from the map, North America and Australia hold a high percentage of immigrants in relation to total population, as well as countries surrounding the Syrian Arab Republic.

It is without a doubt that globalization is occurring at an unprecedented rate in modern times, and the implications of this rapid exchange of capital, ideas, cultures, services, and goods are of significant interest to scholars of all disciplines. Refugees and immigrants, a critical part of these population movements, contribute substantially to this exchange all the while learning to assimilate socially, politically, and economically to their new homes.

Securing employment is one of the first things newcomers must tackle in their country of arrival. Estimates from the IOM show that the majority of migrants around the world are in fact migrant workers, and that migrants have higher labor force participation rates relative to natives<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*

While labor migration is a universal phenomenon, the proportion of foreign workers to native workers is much higher in some regions than in others. In North America, about one in five workers is a migrant.<sup>6</sup>

### **Migrants in San Francisco**

The high number of migrants in San Francisco has been called “remarkable” by scholars.<sup>7</sup> The most massive change in composition came after the 1970s, when the national origins immigration quota was lifted for the first time in forty years, and new laws allowed refugees and asylees to enter with ease. From 1970 to 1990, the amount of foreign-born residents in San Francisco went from 5% of the total population to a whopping 34%. The majority of these migrants were Asian-Pacific Islanders, who constituted about half of the migrant population, and a quarter were of Hispanic descent by 1990.<sup>8</sup> As of 2002, about 25,000 Arabs and Arab Americans were estimated to live in San Francisco.<sup>9</sup> The rapid influx of foreigners led to a compositional makeover of its workforce over the years.

In 2015, all five counties in the area recorded their highest rates of global migrants in the last five years.<sup>10</sup> In San Francisco and Santa Clara counties, people coming from outside the U.S. accounted for two-thirds of the population growth from 2010 - 2015. Technical workers from abroad are a huge resource for the region, with nearly 70% of all software engineers in three of the Bay Area counties being foreign-born in 2013. In addition, the Science, Technology,

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<sup>6</sup> 2015 Global Migration Trends Factsheet. 2017. Ebook. 1st ed. Berlin: International Organization for Migration.

<sup>7</sup> Wells, Miriam J. "Unionization and Immigrant Incorporation in San Francisco Hotels." *Social Problems* 47, no. 2 (2000): 241-65.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Volk, Lucia. "'Kull Wahad La Haalu': Feelings of Isolation and Distress among Yemeni Immigrant Women in San Francisco's Tenderloin." *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 23, no. 4 (2009): 397-416.

<sup>10</sup> Simonson, Sharon. "Global Immigration to the Bay Area at 5-Year High." Silicon Valley One World 2016.

Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields were made up of almost 60% foreign-born persons in 2013, and this number continues to rise. The influx of foreigners to the region has changed its cultural and political landscape over the years, with migrants taking part in city councils, driving up housing costs, and diversifying the retail and restaurant landscapes.<sup>11</sup>

San Francisco city alone welcomes more migrants per capita than any other U.S. city.<sup>12</sup> In 2017, the number of foreign-born residents made up about one third of the city's total population.<sup>13</sup> But beyond those legally classified as residents, immigrants in the city as a whole have around \$7.1 billion in spending power. About 70% of them are of working age, and 12,500 are entrepreneurs.<sup>14</sup> Suffice it to say that the migrant landscape in San Francisco is a significant one.

While these migrants are employed in a wide variety of both low and highly-skilled occupations, the transportation industry has long prevailed amongst this group in numerous countries. And in recent years, the surge of one occupation in particular has created a popular new work opportunity: ridesharing. As of last year, there were only 1,800 taxis registered to drive in San Francisco, but a staggering 45,000 Uber and Lyfts.<sup>15</sup> In the next section, I highlight the current state of affairs surrounding ridesharing in San Francisco, and how this new industry is impacting the local community.

## **Ridesharing in San Francisco**

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<sup>11</sup> Simonson, Sharon. "Global Immigration to the Bay Area at 5-Year High." Silicon Valley One World 2016.

<sup>12</sup> Brinklow, Adam. "San Francisco Welcomes More Immigrants Per Capita than any U.S. City." Curbed SF 2017.

<sup>13</sup> (DADS), Data. 2017. "American Factfinder - Community Facts". Factfinder.Census.Gov.

<sup>14</sup> Bay City News. "Report: Immigrants More than a Third of SF's Population." San Francisco Examiner 2017.

<sup>15</sup> Quan, Holly. 2017. "Number Of Uber, Lyft Drivers Dwarfs San Francisco's Taxi Fleet". CBS.

Uber and Lyft have become ubiquitous throughout the city and are of constant discussion amongst city residents. A three-month study by the San Francisco Police Department revealed that two-thirds of all citations for driving in transit and bike lanes, failing to yield to pedestrians, and other motor vehicle violations in San Francisco are issued to companies like Uber and Lyft. Of all the cars on the road, these so-called Transportation Network Company (TNC) cars make up one out of every four. But the number of violations they receive are disproportionate: three out of four.<sup>16</sup> With an estimated 45,000 TNC cars on the road each year in San Francisco, concern for public safety has spiked tremendously.

In July of 2017, a prominent city attorney petitioned the San Francisco Superior Court to order Uber and Lyft to surrender documents about their drivers. The intent was so that the city could determine whether or not it could take action against the companies on grounds of “public nuisances”.<sup>17</sup> The records included information on drivers who commute to San Francisco from other cities, the most common routes taken, the training they receive, and the amount of hours they spend on SF streets.<sup>18</sup> Traffic, congestion, and safety were the issues of primary concern.

Community members at large have also been fighting to prove to the city that TNC’s are public nuisances. The SF Bicycle Coalition has been tracking TNC’s that block bike lanes for over a year.<sup>19</sup> Safe-street advocates even have a Twitter feed dedicated to Uber and Lyft violations, called “Uber in a Bike Lane”,<sup>20</sup> in which they publically admonish TNC’s for pulling over or double parking in bike lanes.

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<sup>16</sup> Rudick, Roger. "Supervisor Shocked to Hear Uber and Lyft Violate Bike and Transit Lanes." StreetsBlog SF. 2017.

<sup>17</sup> Brinklow, Adam. "SF Takes Lyft, Uber to Court Over 'Public Nuisance'." Curbed SF 2017.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Rudick, Roger. "Supervisor Shocked to Hear Uber and Lyft Violate Bike and Transit Lanes." StreetsBlog SF. 2017.

<sup>20</sup> Uber in a Bike Lane. "Uber in a Bike Lane." Twitter 2017.

Gjel Accident Attorneys, one local law firm, wrote about the issues surrounding Uber and Lyft on their company website. The post, entitled “Uber and Lyft are Changing the Way We Use Our Streets- How Should Cities Respond?” discusses how these companies are “reshaping” transportation,<sup>21</sup> and shows how far this issue extends into the field of public safety. In the article, they echo safe-street advocates by saying that the density of TNC use is colliding with San Francisco street design. And, that although TNC’s do offer a number of advantages, like alleviating drunk driving and parking shortages, assisting in car-free living, and providing transport to and from public transport centers, they also create significant challenges and have become what Gjel calls a “free-for-all”; recklessly parking in bus stops, crosswalks, driveways, and the aforementioned bike lanes.<sup>22</sup>

The conflict at-hand is that what makes TNCs so successful is what may also lead to their demise- the promise of door-to-door transport. Customers flock to these platforms because of their convenience, and yet being door-to-door means that the car must pull over at the exact location upon arrival, which is often a space in which they are not allowed to stop. Should TNCs give up their door-to-door promise and park at an allocated spot farther from the passenger’s location, they may lose popularity.

However, with the industry’s promise of easily-attainable financial capital for drivers, the number of TNC cars on the road is only increasing, and customers have now grown accustomed to the services in their daily lives. Furthermore, passengers have begun to notice a trend within their beloved car service: the prevalence of migrants at the wheel. This study is an exploration into these drivers.

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<sup>21</sup> Gjel Staff. "Uber and Lyft are Changing the Way We Use Our Streets- How Should Cities Respond?" Gjel Accident Attorneys 2017.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

## **Literature Review**

Scholars have crafted extensive work on the experiences of migrants in their countries of arrival. Their work encompasses a vast spectrum of issues, from social assimilation to economic impact, and includes countries and peoples from all corners of the globe. In my analysis of the bodies of literature surrounding the topic of migrant ridesharing drivers in San Francisco, I present here three areas that I find most applicable to my research topic: immigrant/ethnic entrepreneurship, ethnic occupational niches, and the transportation industry. Throughout this paper, I use the term “migrant” as an umbrella term for persons living in a country other than the one in which they were born, and “immigrant” when referring to the scholarly language in which this word has already been cemented, such as “immigrant entrepreneurship”.

## **Theoretical Framework and Immigrant Entrepreneurship**

Immigrant employment has long been studied as a topic of interest amongst scholars. A large chunk of what the sociological literature posits is as follows: self-employment is a major channel for immigrant assimilation in a new country.<sup>23</sup> It is a predominant way immigrants climb the ladder of economic success, due to the fact that many of them create businesses catering to those from their native land. Because their fellow co-ethnics demand products they are familiar with and share a common language, immigrants have an advantage monopolizing the production and distribution process in comparison to their local counterparts.

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<sup>23</sup> Borjas, George J. and George J. Borjas. *The Self-Employment Experience of Immigrants*. United States, North America: 1986.

Table 1 shows the summary statistics of self-employment propensities among six different racial/ethnic groups of men aged 18-64 in the U.S per the 1980 Census.

Table 1. Self-Employment Rates and Incomes

<b>Table 1</b> <i>Self-Employment Rates and Incomes</i>			
Group	Self-Employment Probability	Mean Annual Income of Salaried Workers	Mean Annual Income of Self-Employed Workers
<i>White</i>			
Immigrant	.165	19594.7	24707.7
Native-born	.117	18014.2	23995.4
<i>Black</i>			
Immigrant	.053	12192.7	16469.9
Native-born	.037	12756.7	15036.8
<i>Asian</i>			
Immigrant	.126	16350.3	25454.5
Native-born	.121	17613.4	24149.6
<i>Mexican</i>			
Immigrant	.042	10158.8	13981.8
Native-born	.056	12932.2	17189.2
<i>Cuban</i>			
Immigrant	.156	14090.2	20670.3
Native-born	.109	13762.7	21249.1
<i>Other Hispanic</i>			
Immigrant	.080	12382.4	22598.6
Native-born	.083	14867.5	21338.9

Source: 1980 U.S. Census.

Source: Borjas, George J. and George J. Borjas. *The Self-Employment Experience of Immigrants*. United States, North America: 1986

The table shows that self-employment rates amongst immigrants is usually higher than among native-born co-ethnics. The probability of self-employment is higher among immigrants than natives within each ethnic group except Mexican and Other Hispanic, which deviate only slightly, and in which the immigrant groups still do in fact adhere to a high percentage of



self-employment. In this study, many of the immigrants were in “retail-trade jobs”, such as “variety stores,” “grocery stores,” and “eating and drinking places,” business that can indeed be tailored to consumers of similar national backgrounds.<sup>24</sup>

While the higher rate of self-employment among immigrants can be largely attributed to the use of and reliance on co-ethnics, scholars also recognize that structural inequalities and disadvantages lead immigrants to create their own enterprises. According to the disadvantage theory, the exclusion of minorities from labor markets compels them to seek livelihoods in trade.

<sup>25</sup> It suggests that immigrants have to resort to creating their own jobs because of the host country’s employment structure or prejudices in the labor market. The primary exclusionary factors in the country’s employment structure include not only racial and ethnic prejudices, but also limited language skills and lack of recognition of the academic degree from the sending country. Entrepreneurship is therefore a strategy used by immigrants to make a living in a society that places them at the margin.

The theory of blocked mobility stems from the disadvantage theory; immigrants turn to self-employment because of blocked opportunities in the U.S. labor market. This theory holds that they are blocked because of the aforementioned exclusionary factors of insufficient language skills and foreign academic degrees, and restricts them from upward mobility in the labor market. It is within the framework of the blocked mobility theory that this study resides.

In Los Angeles, one study compared different ethnic business owners to consider if entrepreneurial pursuits are ways for immigrants to overcome the issue of mobility in the labor

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<sup>24</sup> Borjas, George J. and George J. Borjas. *The Self-Employment Experience of Immigrants*. United States, North America: 1986.

<sup>25</sup> Light, Ivan. "Disadvantaged Minorities in Self-Employment." *International Journal of Comparative Sociology (Brill Academic Publishers)* 20, no. 1 (Mar, 1979): 31-45.

market. Results demonstrated that issues like academic degrees and English language proficiency are in fact the primary barriers to upward mobility,<sup>26</sup> and the immigrants in this study did seek entrepreneurial pursuits within ethnic enclaves catering to foreign populations.

Overall, the vast majority of scholars have come to agree that, regardless of the ethnic group, self-employment stems from the barriers that immigrants face in the U.S. labor market.<sup>27</sup>

### **Ethnic Occupational Niches**

At times, particular ethnic groups have risen to prominence in particular economic tasks or industries. In her research on Ethiopian taxicab drivers in Washington, D.C., Elizabeth Chacko finds that “certain ethnic minorities and immigrant groups are known to cluster in distinct lines of work to form ethnic occupational niches...defined as the over-representation of an ethnic group in occupations and activities related to the production of a good or service.”<sup>28</sup> These niches form when an ethnic group takes up a larger percentage of one occupation in particular than their share in the general workforce.<sup>29</sup>

Ethnic niching varies considerably depending on the industry sector.<sup>30</sup> It has been shown that most blue-collar and service occupations in metropolitan areas are taken up by indigenous and non-European groups, whereas jobs in professional and technical fields are dominated by Europeans, Middle Easterners, and certain Asians.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, continuity of niching in

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<sup>26</sup> Rajjman, Rebeca and Marta Tienda. *Immigrants' Pathways to Business Ownership: A Comparative Ethnic Perspective*. Center for Migration Studies of New York, Inc, 2000.

<sup>27</sup> Chacko, E. "Ethiopian Taxicab Drivers: Forming an Occupational Niche in the US Capital." *African and Black Diaspora* 9, no. 2. 200-213.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Wilson, Franklin D. "Ethnic Niching and Metropolitan Labor Markets." *Social Science Research* 32, no. 3 (09, 2003): 429

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

particular sectors across metropolitan areas is uncommon; only a few groups have occupational niches in one industry across multiple metropolitan areas. The context of each metropolitan area must be taken into consideration, as labor markets differ across areas in respect to which resident companies generate the most income flows.<sup>32</sup>

The following are the most common ethnic occupational niches in the United States: Hispanics in domestic work, Koreans in the grocery business, Vietnamese in nail salons, Filipinos in nursing, and Asian Indians in the IT sector. While most of these occupations become niches for low-skilled migrants because of long hours and low pay, the niche of Asian Indians proves that this is not always the case.<sup>33</sup>

Regardless of the particular occupation, ethnic segmentation in the labor force carries significant implications. Some empirical studies show that having a concentration of minority workers in one occupation decreases the earnings for all workers in that occupation.<sup>34</sup> This process further exacerbates socio-economic inequalities of minorities, and understanding it is crucial to issues of immigration and policy.

### **Prevalence of Migrants in the Taxi Industry**

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<sup>32</sup> Wilson, Franklin D. "Ethnic Niching and Metropolitan Labor Markets." *Social Science Research* 32, no. 3 (09, 2003): 429

<sup>33</sup> Chacko, E. "Ethiopian Taxicab Drivers: Forming an Occupational Niche in the US Capital." *African and Black Diaspora* 9, no. 2. 200-213.

<sup>34</sup> Wang, Qingfang and Kavita Pandit. *Measuring Ethnic Labour Market Concentration and Segmentation*. Vol. 33 2007.

One occupational niche historically popular among migrants and refugees is the taxi industry. In Chacko's aforementioned piece on Ethiopian drivers in Washington, D.C., she holds that this is so because of the low barriers to entry. All one must have is the ability to drive, the ability to speak English, and the possession of a valid driver's license. In New York City, taxi drivers evolved from being of mainly Irish, southern European, Puerto Rican, and native African-American groups in the 1960s to majority subcontinental Indian by the mid-1980s.<sup>35</sup>

In *Accumulation and Labor Relations in the Taxi Industry*, Meshack Khosa quotes David Harvey to say that the growth of the taxi industry can be seen through the lens of "capitalist accumulation and class struggle...different sides of the same coin - different windows from which to view the totality of capitalist activity."<sup>36</sup> Khosa shows how it was difficult for Black Africans in South Africa to purchase a taxi to drive because they lacked financial capital. Financial institutions were unwilling to give them loans because they lacked credit records and references, and they could not offer collateral as they did not have land rights. Finances had to come from savings or family members. In addition, Khosa's research speaks to the tendency of taxi owners to pull their labor force from rural areas, as these recruits were willing to work for low wages. Otherwise, they had no means of existence in the urban city.<sup>37</sup> What this study highlights are the widespread structural barriers to job advancement.

In Leavitt and Blasi's work in *Driving Poor: Taxi Drivers and the Regulation of the Taxi Industry in Los Angeles*, the authors found that contrary to conventional views, taxi driving is

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<sup>35</sup> Wang, Qingfang and Kavita Pandit. *Measuring Ethnic Labour Market Concentration and Segmentation*. Vol. 33 2007.

<sup>36</sup> Harvey, David. *Flexible Accumulation through Urbanization Reflections on 'Post-Modernism' in the American City*. Rizzoli International Publications, 1990.

<sup>37</sup> Khosa, M. "Accumulation and Labour Relations in the Taxi Industry." *Transformation* 24, no. 1994 (1994): 55-71.

not a transitional job. The median Los Angeles taxi driver in their study was: 1) an immigrant who 2) supported a family and 3) drove for an average of 9.5 years. The majority of drivers hailed from Russia, Ethiopia, Armenia, and Iran. Echoing Chacko's work, Leavitt and Blasi found that access to the industry was easy: drivers only needed to speak English, have no past DUIs that caused injury to others, and be a U.S. citizen. Consequently, due to the education and training they had received in their home country, most of the drivers were overqualified. Of their sample of 302 taxi drivers, nearly half (49%) had previously worked in skilled trade or business or professional occupations prior to becoming a driver.<sup>38</sup>

Ease of access to the industry, *in contrast* to other occupations, is one of the main reasons migrants are attracted to work in the taxi industry. In *Driving Poor*, one driver is quoted as saying that migrants "have a very limited view of the jobs you can take."<sup>39</sup> The author goes on to say that migrants are drawn to the taxi industry because it compares favorably to minimum wage jobs, and drivers can be their own boss. In addition, although English is a requirement for the occupation, taxi driving is still feasible if one is a non-native speaker and can speak other languages. Some drivers in the study were said to have found their jobs through ethnic, non-English language newspapers.

## **San Francisco and the Rise of Ridesharing**

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<sup>38</sup> Blasi, Gary and Jacqueline Leavitt. "Driving Poor: Taxi Drivers and the Regulation of the Taxi Industry in Los Angeles." *Project Funded by the UCLA Institute of Industrial Relation and Published in* (2006).

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

In San Francisco, so-called “chauffeur-corporations” have been in existence since 1909. As these corporations evolved over time from private chauffeurs to taxis to Transportation Network Companies, they underwent massive changes in regulation; the liabilities and responsibilities of business shifted from the companies onto their workers.<sup>40</sup>

Taxi driving was as prevalent in San Francisco as any other major city. For decades in the mid-20th century, the United Taxicab Workers (UTW) of San Francisco fought tirelessly for regulation of competition and rates for their drivers. Their success was hard-earned, and saw years of low but relatively stable wages. In this regulated market, competition was controlled, fares were stable, and drivers used company cars that were commercially-insured. Each month, they financed a taxi medallion through a credit union, which allowed them to drive their car legally.

Amidst the economic downturn in 2009, San Francisco mayor Gavin Newsom disrupted the taxi industry with a move all expected would stimulate the city’s economy; he re-privatized taxi medallions by allowing drivers to pay \$250,000 upfront to the city. Now, drivers could pay a lump-sum to own the medallion instead of paying a monthly fee for years. They flocked to purchase them, borrowing money from family members and taking out loans. Three months later, a company was born that would ultimately render these medallions useless: Uber.<sup>41</sup>

These next-generation of taxis hit San Francisco at full force three years later, along with Lyft, and UTW and taxi drivers around the city encountered an unprecedented situation. These new companies branded themselves as technology start-ups, and allowed drivers to operate

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<sup>40</sup> Dubal, V. B. 1.,2. "The Drive to Precarity: A Political History of Work, Regulation, & Labor Advocacy in San Francisco's Taxi & Uber Economies." *Berkeley Journal of Employment & Labor Law* 38, no. 1 (01, 2017)

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*

“extra-legally”<sup>42</sup>; outside of state and municipal regulatory frameworks related to for-hire vehicles. Now, an unregulated amount of commercially unlicensed drivers could pick up and drop off passengers with their personal vehicles and the help of a centralized dispatch application on their smartphones.<sup>43</sup> So although taxi drivers had to essentially pay in order to work, their vehicles were insured and they worked in a regulated market with stable fares. Uber and Lyft drivers, in comparison, drive their own private vehicles in an unregulated market, and workers consequently bear all the financial and legal risks associated with work.

The city issued multiple cease-and-desist orders over the next few years to both Uber and Lyft for operating illegally. However, the companies eventually earned legal status, using the argument that they are *software* companies and not *transportation* companies, and therefore exempt from San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency and California Public Utilities Commission regulations. In addition, they called their service a “rideshare” as opposed to a “cab” or “taxi”. And so, taxi drivers, despite their heavy investment into the medallions, had no choice but to abandon their cab companies and head to Uber and Lyft, where business was booming.<sup>44</sup>

Against immense push-back from taxi companies, state policymakers officially legalized the ridesharing platforms in 2015. It was a move branded under the pretense of not “stifling innovation”.<sup>45</sup> They called the companies “Transportation Network Companies (TNCs)” and therefore sidestepped their categorization as not taxi businesses but entirely different, innovative entities. Regulations that were previously controlled by the city were handed over to the TNCs.

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<sup>42</sup> Dubal, V. B. 1.,2. "The Drive to Precarity: A Political History of Work, Regulation, & Labor Advocacy in San Francisco's Taxi & Uber Economies." *Berkeley Journal of Employment & Labor Law* 38, no. 1 (01, 2017)

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

Deregulation permeated the transportation industry. Now, drivers could join the ranks without having to apply for commercial licenses, and safety regulations set by the state were outsourced to TNCs who only had to verify compliance annually. Most strikingly, fares and the number of rides and cars operating were left completely unrestricted. Two years later, the TNCs implemented a fare-splitting feature called “Uber Pool” and “Lyft Line”, in which drivers would essentially drive farther to pick up multiple passengers for less money. Drivers had no collective bargaining rights, were outside of California minimum-wage laws, and their taxicab-brethren were making equally low pay.<sup>46</sup>

### **Uber Driver Reports**

There have been only a handful of studies done on ridesharing drivers around the United States, and these have focused only on Uber. One study in particular, conducted by the Benenson Strategy Group (BSG), gathered administrative data from Uber as well as data from a survey of 601 drivers using the platform from 2012-2014. Hall and Krueger used this study as a jumping off point for their analysis of the sharing economy in the United States. Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of Uber drivers, known as “driver-partners,” compared to taxi drivers and chauffeurs, and workers in the U.S. overall. This report did not distinguish between native and foreign-born drivers.

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<sup>46</sup> Dubal, V. B. 1.,2. "The Drive to Precarity: A Political History of Work, Regulation, & Labor Advocacy in San Francisco's Taxi & Uber Economies." *Berkeley Journal of Employment & Labor Law* 38, no. 1 (01, 2017)



Table 2. Characteristics of Uber’s Driver-Partners, Taxi Drivers, and All Workers

	Uber’s Driver-Partners (BSG Survey)	Taxi Drivers and Chauffeurs (ACS)	All workers (ACS)
Age 18-29	19.1%	8.5%	21.8%
30-39	30.1%	19.9%	22.5%
40-49	26.3%	27.2%	23.4%
50-64	21.8%	36.6%	26.9%
65+	2.7%	7.7%	4.6%
Female	13.8%	8.0%	47.4%
Less than HS	3.0%	16.3%	9.3%
High School	9.2%	36.2%	21.3%
Some College / Associate’s	40.0%	28.8%	28.4%
College Degree	36.9%	14.9%	25.1%
Postgraduate Degree	10.8%	3.9%	16.0%
White Non-Hispanic	40.3%	26.2%	55.8%
Black Non-Hispanic	19.5%	31.6%	15.2%
Asian Non-Hispanic	16.5%	18.0%	7.6%
Other Non-Hispanic	5.9%	2.0%	1.9%
Hispanic	17.7%	22.2%	19.5%
Married	50.4%	59.4%	52.6%
Have Children at Home	46.4%	44.5%	42.2%
Currently Attending School	6.7%	5.0%	10.1%
Veteran	7.0%	5.3%	5.2%
Number of Observations	601	2,080	648,494

Notes: ACS data pertain to the same 20 Uber markets as the BSG survey, and are for 2012 and 2013.

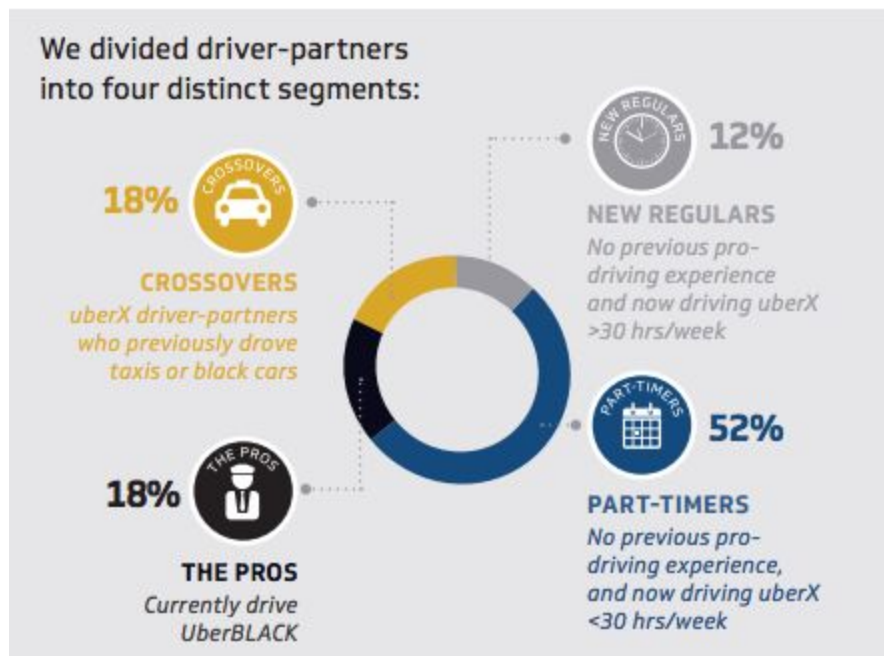
Source: Hall, Jonathan and Alan Krueger. *An Analysis of the Labor Market for Uber’s Driver-Partners in the United States*: Princeton University, 2015.

Beyond only the 20 markets from which data was pulled in the table above, the study found that the ethnic and racial composition of Uber drivers surveyed closely match that of taxi drivers and chauffeurs in the United States.

The BSG report on Uber drivers collected data on participants’ past and futures. They found that the majority of drivers saw their financial status increase after signing up with Uber,

were majority male, chose the occupation for its flexible schedule, and that half of the drivers had driven for a living at some point in their lives.

Figure 2. Four Categories of Uber Driver-Partners



Source: Benenson Strategy Group. *Uber: The Driver Roadmap*: Benenson Strategy Group, 2015.

Figure 2 shows the four categories, referred to as “segments,” of Uber drivers as found in the BSG Report. The figure shows that 18% of the 601 participants previously had experience with taxis or chauffeur companies, 18% currently drove for Uber’s upscale car service, UberBLACK, 12% were brand new to the driving industry and drove over 30 hours per week, and half (52%) had no previous professional experience and were driving part-time.

Here is where my study unfolds. It has become evident that scholars have comprehensively covered the topics of ethnic entrepreneurship, ethnic occupational niches, the taxi industry, and most recently, the path to ridesharing. My ethnography will take these

interconnected bodies of literature in a new direction. Little research has been done on migrant drivers in ridesharing companies, and it is a unique occupational niche in that it is not made up of one particular ethnic group, but many. In addition, unlike Borjas' study, which asserts that immigrants open businesses catering to co-ethnics because of advantages they have over the native population, driving is a skill that the native population has equal knowledge of, if not more, in their home country.

The majority of literature unpacks the relations of migrants in the taxi industry. My study will derive from this in focusing on ridesharing; the use of a private car, the flexible schedule, and the issues surrounding independent contracting. The ridesharing services of Uber and Lyft have immensely risen in popularity in recent years, and yet there has been no study on migrant experiences with these companies. With so many working as drivers, their prevalence in this occupation should not be overlooked.

My main research question asks, what are the factors that lead migrant drivers in San Francisco to choose ridesharing as their occupation? This narrow question alludes to two more overarching questions: 1) what do these factors say about structural barriers in the U.S. labor market, and 2) what are the implications of labor market segregation? These will be posed in the context of the theory of blocked mobility. My study will explore whether or not migrant drivers in San Francisco have turned to this occupation because of blocked opportunities in our labor market.

## **Research Methodology**

Methodology design began in May of 2017 with an application for study approval to the Internal Review Board (IRB). Taking a mixed methods approach, I used three different techniques for this study: in-person interviews, an online questionnaire, and participant observation.

Because the main intent behind this study is to understand reasoning and choice-making among certain individuals, this study uses interviews as the primary method of data collection. Interviews allow for direct questioning of study participants, personable communication between the interviewer and interviewee, and lead to in-depth insight of an individual's perceptions.

Starting from June 2017, I used the ridesharing applications Uber and Lyft at a rate normal for my day-to-day life: about once a week. If my driver happened to be a migrant, I would offer a summary of my study and ask if they would like to be interviewed. Most happily obliged. Given that they were on the job when I met them as a passenger in their vehicle, plans were usually made to meet at a later day and time at their convenience. However, this proved difficult logistically, and I was only able to meet with one driver this way over the course of two months. In September, I began simultaneously interviewing the drivers, with their consent, while I rode like any other passenger in their vehicle in the commute time available between my pickup and drop-off point. This method allowed for greater data collection while also respecting the limited time schedules of the driver-participants.

Because there is no publicly-available database of migrant ridesharing drivers, I relied on opportunity sampling, making contact with the drivers as they were assigned to me via the ridesharing application. Once in the car, I would explain to them that I was conducting a study

on drivers of Uber and Lyft for academic purposes, and ask for verbal consent before proceeding. Of the 15 drivers that I asked, only one said no, because he wanted to concentrate on his driving. I would then ask drivers if I could record the conversation on my cellphone, to which roughly half agreed. I never asked a driver if I could interview them if I was participating in a ride with other passengers; i.e. in an Uber Pool or Lyft Line.

My secondary method of obtaining information was in the form of an online questionnaire. It contained similar questions to the interviews, and was created to reach informants who would not be able to meet with me in person. I created business cards with the title of the study, URL of the questionnaire, and contact information for myself and my advisor.

Figure 3. Online Questionnaire Distribution Card



Card made by author

I dispersed these business cards throughout my social network, with the idea that peers could give the card to a driver should they meet one while using the ridesharing application, or in various ways in their daily lives. I personally gave the cards to drivers who a) were unable to

meet in person, b) did not have sufficient English skills for an interview, and c) crossed my path via other applications, like UberEats.

While I gave a brief summary of the study to drivers when I handed them the card, there was no monetary incentive for drivers to complete the questionnaire. I received no responses on the questionnaire from drivers to whom I gave the card. The only two responses collected came from drivers found through my personal social network, who answered the questions with the aide of a translator. The data from these surveys is discussed briefly in this thesis, but since the method itself failed to recruit at a sufficient response rate, the survey data is offered here as a supplement to interviews and participant-observation.

Lastly, participant observation of the drivers was conducted as I rode in their vehicle. It includes observation of time spent a) interviewing them in their vehicle, and b) riding as a passenger in their vehicle. These techniques gleaned different information: their response to being interviewed, and their response to an individual passenger. Each participant was met with only once.

## **Results**

Using data gathered from 14 foreign-born Uber and Lyft drivers in San Francisco, I assess the factors that led to their choice to work in the ridesharing driver occupation. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted in-person with 12 of the drivers, and the remaining 2 drivers responded to an online questionnaire. I have organized the results into the following areas: demographics, migration pathways, labor history, English language level, ridesharing

earnings, participant-reasoning in choosing the occupation, and participant-sentiment toward the occupation.

To protect participant identity, all of the names included here are pseudonyms. Interviews that were recorded have been transcribed and the excerpts provided are lightly edited for clarity.

## Demographics

The total sample consisted of 14 male drivers between the ages of 22 - 68. It was by happenstance that all of the drivers were male; no female drivers were presented as my driver in the two months that I requested rides with the ridesharing application for the purpose of this study, which aligns with previous literature stating that most ridesharing drivers are male.<sup>47</sup> Drivers hailed from the following nations: Afghanistan (2) , Iran (1), China (3), Taiwan (1), Brazil (1), Venezuela (1), Sri Lanka (1), India (1), Nepal (1) and Russia (2), and had been in the U.S. from two to an estimated 50 years. Of the 11 who provided their highest level of education completed, two had completed high school, one had taken some college courses, one had an Associate's degree, five had a Bachelor's degree, and two had a Master's degree. Finally, nine out of the 14 drivers supported a family. Table 3 on the following page lists each of the participant's pseudonymic names, their nationality, age, and number of years in the United States for reference.

Table 3. Driver Participant by Nationality, Age, and Years in U.S.

	Name	Nationality	Age	Years in U.S.
1	Roshan	Afghanistan	28	2 years

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<sup>47</sup> Benenson Strategy Group. *Uber: The Driver Roadmap*: Benenson Strategy Group, 2015.

2	Adil	Afghanistan	~30+	5 years
3	Tiago	Brazil	~40+	17 years
4	Chan	China	22	7 years
5	Ping	China	35	8 years
6	Li	China	30	10 years
7	Shahil	India	~55+	10 years
8	Hamid	Iran	~25+	8 years
9	Rai	Nepal	60	20 years
10	Vlad	Russia	55-64	12 years
11	Demetri	Russia	55-64	24 years
12	Mason	Taiwan	68	40 years
13	Gota	Sri Lanka	~30+	5 years
14	Gabriel	Venezuela	~55+	40+ years

Table made by author. Ages with ~ beforehand have been estimated by author based on information provided.

Ten different countries are represented in this sample. The median age was between ~35-40 years old, and participants had been in the U.S. an average of ~14 years.

### **Migration to the United States**

The interviewees took various migration pathways to the United States. Five of the men, the largest sub-group, came voluntarily for reasons involving education opportunities, work opportunities, and overall quality of life - so-called economic migrants.<sup>48</sup> Four came to the United States as a respite from violence or persecution in their home countries. Two of these participants came as refugees; an Iranian who was a part of a minority Muslim group, and a Sri Lankan who was fleeing war at home. Another, an Afghan man, was granted a Special

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<sup>48</sup> Ghoshal, Animesh, and Thomas M. Crowley. "Refugees and Immigrants: A Human Rights Dilemma." *Human Rights Quarterly* 5, no. 3 (1983): 327-47.



Immigrant Visa because he worked with U.S. Coalition Forces in Afghanistan. A Venezuelan participant was sent to the United States by his parents when he was a teenager for education opportunities (see Byrne on unaccompanied minors)<sup>49</sup>, and a Nepalese participant had won the diversity lottery<sup>50</sup>. Finally, one informant came from Brazil to make more money than was possible at home, with the intent of returning to Brazil- a phenomenon known as cyclical migration<sup>51</sup>. The reasons for migration of the two Russian participants who responded to the questionnaire are unknown.

In the section below, I present excerpts of interviews with three of the drivers describing their migration path to the United States. The date of the interview, the participant's pseudonym, and their country of origin are included after each excerpt.

What brought me to the US? Well, I'm part of a religion in Iran which we're denied to go to university, work, and pretty much they do not even consider us as a human being. So, that is why we came to USA, so we can continue our study, and have a life we want...at the time I had my sister who living here and she sponsored us. (9/8/17, Hamid, Iran)

I came here about 40 years ago from Taiwan. You know, I have family. When I come here I was 28 years old, and my sister applied for me, and I get green card, and my sister say 'Oh you can go do school', but I say 'We need a new house. Money. Maybe I need to work...'. (9/23/17, Mason, Taiwan)

Okay, the first time, is before like 17 years ago. It's like dreaming, all the Brazilians coming to the United States, right? It's like dreaming, say, because the people come like 1985, 1990s, they working here about three years, four years, come back and have a good life in Brazil, right? And...I have a lot of friends come here 1995 say 'Oh you have a good life in United States'. The point is to say; it's dreaming...It's American dream for like Brazilian people, you know? (9/27/17, Tiago, Brazil)

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<sup>49</sup> Byrne, Olga. "Unaccompanied Children in the United States." *Vera Institute of Justice* (2008).

<sup>50</sup> Law, Anna O. "The Diversity Visa Lottery: A Cycle of Unintended Consequences in United States Immigration Policy." *Journal of American Ethnic History* 21, no. 4 (2002): 3-29.

<sup>51</sup> Wickramasekara, Piyasiri. "Globalisation, International Labour Migration and the Rights of Migrant Workers." *Third World Quarterly* 29, no. 7 (2008): 1247-264.

It was with different intentions that the drivers came to the United States. Because their motivations varied, their migration path varied. While Hamid came because of a negative experience he was having in his home country, Mason came to the United States with an exploratory mindset of a potential new home with better economic opportunities. Tiago's rationale was also economic- he came because of the opportunity to make more money than he could at home.

### **Labor History in the United States**

Most of the drivers held a wide range of occupations in the U.S. before starting work in the ridesharing industry. The majority had low-skilled jobs, including work as a busboy, dishwasher, taxi driver, pizza deliveryman, gas station attendant, and jewelry salesman. Half of the drivers were taxi drivers previously, and one was currently driving for a taxi company in addition to ridesharing. Three of the drivers had high-skilled jobs in their home countries, including engineering (electrical, mechanical), and business ownership. Featured below are four excerpts highlighting these contrasting labor pathways, including the participants' duration in the United States:

So first I started with McDonalds, and then I worked for a car dealership and then I worked for Apple warehouse, and after that I was a truck unloader at Walmart, and after that I worked in electronic department in Walmart, and also worked for IHSS. I still do IHSS. In-Home Support Service. I've been doing that for maybe five years. And what else...I skipped so many of my jobs, now I do Lyft and Uber and Amazon [driving]. (Hamid, Iran, 8 years)

A man bring me go to the Chinese restaurant in his neighborhood in Santa Rosa. The boss say, 'You are so young'. Maybe I give him 20 sentences of English. He say, 'If you study, you can work weekend, make more money'. So I try...to be the waiter. Work two months I said 'No, my legs feel so heavy'. Before in Taiwan, I was an engineer. But, I quit job in Taiwan, so when I went back - no job. Only can drive taxi. Taxi is very easy in Taiwan. So I drive taxi...because in Taiwan I quit the engineer to come here, I cannot go back engineer. No more. I drive taxi almost ten months...and then, I bring my kids, my family, come again [to U.S.]. This time...winter for two months. Then I the salesman in Chinatown...for sell the herbs, ginseng, grocery, something. In that time I work about five years. Then... I change job, go to the travel company for tour guide. In San Francisco. In San Francisco I was tour guide until two years ago. I saw

somebody say drive the Uber. Somebody introduce me to Uber. Then somebody try to tell me go to Lyft. So I go to Lyft. (Mason, Taiwan, 40 years)

I come here Oakland, then I living in Oakland then I go to working for Fremont. Then before I work in restaurant or something, then I don't like restaurant job then I go to working for furnitures. That time I did part time job in Uber, now it's full time job. It [the furniture job] was good but I need more money. Restaurant is little bit money, basic salary, no it's growing. That's why I go to furnitures company. That one is good salary, then three year I working that company. Good salary, \$15.50, but then my wife is pregnant, so I needed more option, so I quit the job. I resigned the job. I needed more time to go to the clinic, that's why I resigned the job. Then Uber before part time job, now it's full time. (10/9/17, Gota, Sri Lanka, 5 years)

...my plan is stay three, four years, for 2000-2004, maximum 2005. And, I make a lot of money you know because before I work like three jobs. And I start first job as a dishwasher. And after that I learned a little bit English because I come here speak English. I learned little bit English and start deliver pizza. And I know like all the city, and start like deliver pizza and restaurant delivery. And I stayed for 2004, and I go back and try open the business in Brazil. It's no successful. I come back in 2006. And 2006 I started driving cab. I work in Yellow Cab 2006 - 2013. After this one I work [another job] like because the driver license expire you know? I can't renew the driver's license so I can't drive. I start work like a Brazilian coffee shop and I still work for about two years and a half...I start Lyft and Uber. (Tiago, Brazil, 17 years)

Well I worked construction for a while. When I was in school. When I graduated from school, college, I did odd jobs, construction, bred horses for a while, then I was taking care of a recreation area for a city, and I got tired of it all and I said, you know what? I want to go see the world. So I became a flight attendant. And I did that for about 10-13 years. I was a realtor for 19 years. Then I stopped. You need money. Had to do with because I got divorced then I lost a lot of money. I did taxi driving, and I was making more money than I'm making now. Then, Uber came around and swiped everybody up. The taxi industry is on its way out. There's no taxis anymore. (10/1/17, Gabriel, Venezuela, 50 years)

Another driver, Adil (Afghanistan), was working as an Apple technician and had a Master's degree in Intellectual Property Rights, and proactively turned to ridesharing because he needed a flexible schedule to tend to his two autistic children when needed.

As seen, job fluctuation prior to ridesharing was evident in several of the driver's stories. In regards to Gota's pathway, he left a job he enjoyed with a living wage because of family affairs that required him to have a more flexible schedule. For Mason, however, driving had been a part of his career for years and traversing the city was already a part of his industry as a tour guide, similar to Tiago. Gabriel was one of the participants who had high-skilled occupations previously; perhaps due to the fact that he arrived in the United States as a teenager, had a Bachelor's degree from an American university, and spoke English fluently. Also shown here

in-depth are the multiple attempts at migration, with economic rationale being at the forefront of three of the five driver's decisions.

### **English Language Level**

Local language knowledge is an extremely important factor in regard to job prospects and socioeconomic mobility in a new country. Of the 14 interviewees, not one spoke English as their native language. Their skill level covered a wide range; five of the drivers had a low skill level, two had an intermediate level, six had an advanced level, and one was fluent. I have assigned these classifications based on an assessment of their language capabilities during our interviews.

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Few of the drivers had taken English classes in the United States. Most of them had learned at some point in their home country through the education system or family. However, Hamid stated that he was mandated to take classes in the U.S. as a requirement for receiving welfare when he first arrived:

I had to because that was the only way they gave us welfare, and I told them so many times, 'I don't need it!' but...

Four of the drivers explicitly stated that they felt there was a relation between their English skills and their opportunities with school and work in the United States. Three of the four perceived their English skill level to be insufficient for other jobs, and one felt his English level was too insufficient to even apply to college. Not one driver proffered that they had *lost* a job because of

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<sup>52</sup> The author is certified in teaching English as a Second Language and trained in evaluating English performance.

their English skills or that they were told by a potential employer that their English level was too low for the occupation. According to Hamid,

I think none of the job I had so far was related on being expert in talking and writing English except maybe Apple because I was a data entry operator or at some cases maybe Walmart. I may say I didn't *apply* for some jobs because I didn't feel confident in my English.

On why he chose the ridesharing occupation, Demetri states,

I don't speak English much, but I need to support my family. I can't be an engineer here like I was at home. (Survey response, 10/11/17, Russia)

In contrast, a few of the drivers stated that they felt their English level had no effect on their job opportunities here; they had chosen the ridesharing occupation for alternative reasons.

### **Ridesharing Earnings**

The following table shows the distribution of driver participants by the number of hours per week they drove and their reported annual income:

Table 4. Driver Participants by Hours per Week and Reported Annual Income

	16 to 34 hours/week	35 to 49	Over 50
Ping	\$30,000		
Adil	\$40,000		
Vlad		\$20,000	
Shahil		\$35,000	
Demetri		\$40,000	
Gota		\$45,000	
Li		\$58,000	
Tiago		\$70,000	
Gabriel			\$35,000
Mason			\$70,000

Chan			\$75,000
Hamid			\$84,000

Table made by author

Table 4 shows that there is generally an upward relationship between hours worked and annual income. It should be noted, however, that not all drivers clarified to me whether or not the income they reported was before or after taxes. Many of the drivers who stated they made around \$70,000 did follow up with a statement that after taxes, they made about \$35,000. Therefore, it can be assumed that the majority of the drivers in this study made around \$35-40,000 annually from ridesharing after taxes.

However, some drivers gave conflicting information on taxes, with one driver expressing that “There are no taxes. There are no taxes. So you have to pay on top of that.” (Gabriel, Venezuela). In contrast, Rai (Nepal) stated that

The income depends on...well there are many expenses. We have to pay taxes, our own taxes. So, mine is like 30-35,000 a year. If I work full. Every driver thinks it's big money but they don't do the math like all the expenses, taxes, all those things. (9/20/17)

Many of the drivers stated that their income also revolved around bonuses offered by the ridesharing companies, which resulted in income inconsistency. These so-called “Weekly Promotions”, offered by both Lyft and Uber, include completing a certain number of trips in a limited time period, or driving in a featured location during certain times of day in order to earn extra money on top of their normal fares. These bonuses likely contribute to the congestion noted by the city, as previously mentioned in this paper. Some participants were very deliberate in maneuvering their schedule around these promotions, which paid off with higher earnings.

## Why Ridesharing?

Each driver was asked why they chose the ridesharing occupation as opposed to other jobs. The following were stated as the most prominent reasons: 1) a flexible schedule, coupled with 2) the amount of money made, and 3) the ease of entry. The first two reasons were also given as the top motivations in the aforementioned BSG report of Uber drivers around the nation.

<sup>53</sup> However, for this study, there is variety even within these factors. Only two drivers actively sought out the occupation because of its flexible schedule; they left a job they enjoyed for ridesharing because the schedule allowed them the freedom to attend to something more important to them- one because his wife was pregnant and needed his translation skills for hospital visits, and the other to be more available for his autistic children. Whereas the factor of a flexible schedule was immensely enjoyed by others, they did not turn to it out of such necessity.

Three of the drivers mentioned that not having a boss was the primary reason they went into the ridesharing industry. Various reasons included not having to answer to someone, not having to ask for days off, and setting one's own work hours, which overlaps with the factor of a flexible schedule. Three others saw driving as a transitional job; they planned to leave the industry within the next 6 months- two to pursue jobs they liked more (sushi chef, smoke shop owner), and one because he was moving back to a city he felt was too large in size to conduct ridesharing. Essentially, these drivers saw ridesharing as something they could turn to while they secured a more permanent and satisfying job.

The remaining drivers turned to the ridesharing industry out of various forms of necessity:

According to my age, this job is perfect for me. (9/20/17, Rai, Nepal)

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<sup>53</sup> Benenson Strategy Group. *Uber: The Driver Roadmap*: Benenson Strategy Group, 2015.

I don't speak English enough to get any other job. (9/1/17, Vlad, Russia)

[I'm driving] out of necessity. At this age, no one hires you. So you have to do something. So I start doing this. But eventually I have to get out...At the time, I had no option. I was unemployed for three years [before ridesharing]. No other option. (Gabriel, Venezuela)

I cannot do any other job here. (10/11/17, Shahil, India)

Each driver over ~50 years old cited age as a predominant reason they chose the driver occupation. Insufficient English skills and lack of other job options were other reasons drivers gave. In regards to why they chose ridesharing over the taxi industry, drivers stated that:

Taxi's dead. There's no money with the taxi. Because taxi's have a bad reputation. Never show up. When customer call, never show up. That's why Uber and Lyft must succeed. (9/20/17, Rai, Nepal)

I did taxi driving. I did that before, and I was making more money than I'm making now. Then, Uber came around and swiped everybody up. The taxi industry is on its way out. There's no taxis anymore. (Gabriel, Venezuela)

[Ridesharing] adds to my taxi driving income. (Survey response, 9/1/17, Vlad, Russia)

These excerpts highlight a general consensus from the drivers; the ridesharing industry has more business than the taxi industry. Essentially, they went from taxis to the ridesharing occupation because of the lure of higher financial capital. Other drivers stated that the ease in using their own car was a main factor in choosing ridesharing over taxi driving.

### **Driver Sentiment Toward Ridesharing**



What do these drivers actually think of their occupation? Each driver was asked what they thought were the advantages and disadvantages of being a ridesharing driver. In addition, I asked whether or not they thought that this occupation was the best option for them at the time.

The majority of drivers said that the greatest advantage of being a ridesharing driver was its flexible schedule. Meeting new people, seeing the city, money, a fast pace, and independence were the remaining advantages mentioned, in that order. Gota (Sri Lanka) stated that what he enjoyed about the occupation was that if he needed more money, he had the option of working more hours. Adil (Afghanistan) was appreciative of an occupation that allowed him to spend time with his autistic children.

While meeting new people was high on the list of advantages for many drivers, the most common disadvantage also involved passengers. Two of the drivers stated that their least favorite part of the occupation was dealing with “drunk people” and the industry’s general lack of regulation over passengers. Roshan (Afghanistan) said some passengers would “speak rubbish” or act “crazy.” On what he disliked, Gabriel (Venezuela) said,

Drunks. The company itself I don't agree with; the owner being prejudiced towards women, prejudiced towards anybody. I would say, last year, I had a good time because it was my own time I did whatever I wanted to. But, there's no freedom here. You have to understand the under. The layers. There's layers. 'Oh you have this you have that.' No. It's slavery and it's sad. Slavery. That's what it is. No choice. Best job I had was being a realtor. I could make a quarter million dollars in a year. Look what I'm doing..

Some drivers who said they enjoyed the occupation for themselves stated that they would not recommend it to others:

No I don't. Because you know like now you have to put too many hours with this job to make money, and some new driver come with a brand new car, and he can't make money and he get bad. And another thing is, the most important thing is, in San Francisco it's not easy to drive anymore. Because we are scared of parking guy, police, they always tracking Uber and Lyft driver, with cameras. The parking guy has camera and they take the picture- wherever they stop, they take the picture. And ticket comes in the mail with the picture. So I don't recommend anybody, but perhaps if somebody is very interested, then I just guide them. That's it. But if I recommend? Some driver got mad with me, said there's no money, why you tell me to come and do this? Yup, like that. (Rai, Nepal)

The fear of driving citations and the long hours necessary for decent pay held this driver back from recommending it to others. Tiago (Brazil) said that it was both the “best job” and that he would not recommend it for those who do not like driving. While some drivers came to the occupation from a friend’s recommendation, they said they did it because it was a temporary job and they would not want to do it full time. One driver, Shahil (India), explained that he was “very happy” that he did not need to be a ridesharing driver; he commuted 75 miles every day with his daughter to drop her off and pick her up from her job at the San Francisco airport- he was only driving to pass the time in San Francisco as she worked. He received pension as a senior citizen, and so did not turn to the occupation out of economic necessity.

The negative impact of driving on bodily health was explicitly mentioned by five of the drivers. Li (China) stated that while he enjoyed that the money he earned from driving kept him afloat, it was very tiring to drive around the city all day. Others echoed this sentiment:

Too many hours sitting behind the wheel, back aches. (Survey response, Demetri, Russia)

I am still behind the wheel all day long, and as I am getting older, my body is aching from it. (Survey response, Vlad, Russia)

As far as I’m active, I will drive, but the point is...this job is killing health. It kills health. Sitting like this for 7 hours, no blood circulation and sometimes our body, butt feels numbness. And I know some drivers who got stroke. One was a Lyft driver two years ago, and [while I was] driving a cab I saw like more than 4 drivers dead there silently, while waiting at the airport. Inside the car. Silently. The stroke. Nobody knows! He’s sitting in the seat. I drove like five years, taxi. And they die suddenly and everyone’s saying ‘Move! Move! Move!’ But that car is not moving. So somebody say, ‘What happened?’ He’s gone! Dead. Nobody knows when he got stroke. So this job, kills health...that’s why I don’t say people should drive. I mean I have this job, but this kills health. High blood pressure. High blood sugar. And some urine problem, because now we have problem the bathroom. Its very hard I mean, you know? Bathrooms, parking, we don’t have facilities like cab driver they stopping for the hotel and they go bathroom. This is the most important one. All the other driver says this. Lyft is doing nothing, Lyft and Uber not change....at night time is the problem. Because we can’t pee anywhere. And so night time is, some gas station open some close, yeah so night time is problem. (Rai, Nepal)

As seen, sitting all day was a main reason drivers felt their physical health was at risk. Rai’s comment on the ridesharing drivers’ inability to use hotel restrooms like their taxi counterparts

brings up an issue previously highlighted in this paper; the loss of rights on behalf of the workers in the transition from taxis to the deregulated ridesharing industry. Because they are independent contractors, ridesharing drivers have no partnerships with local businesses as taxi drivers do, and therefore are not granted their amenities.

## **Research Analysis**

The information gathered from the sample of 14 male drivers demonstrated that the participants chose the ridesharing occupation for a variety of reasons. While some were driving temporarily with the intention of changing jobs within six months, others planned to drive for the rest of their lives. The level of English language skills varied amongst participants, as well as their labor history and education background. Previous jobs stretched from low-skilled jobs like busboy, to high-skilled jobs like realtor and electrical engineer. One driver had obtained a high school diploma as his highest level of education, while two had completed Master's degrees.

Finally, some drivers immensely enjoyed the occupation, while others referred to it as “slavery”

<sup>54</sup>.

Let us now review the theory of blocked mobility: immigrants are excluded from labor markets not only because of racial and ethnic prejudices, but also limited language skills and a lack of recognition of the academic degree from the sending country. In the case of the ridesharing occupation, only one participant out of the 14 explicitly proves the theory to be true.

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<sup>54</sup> See Gabriel's excerpt, page 39

In this excerpt from my fieldnotes, Roshan (Afghanistan), explains how he had a Bachelor's degree in Engineering from his home country, and why he couldn't get a job in his field here:

He has a Bachelor's degree in Engineering (Electrical) from Afghanistan, but was unable to get a job in that field when he arrived. He said he applied to a few jobs *but they turned him down because they wanted him to have a Bachelor's degree from the U.S.* He studied for one semester at Santa Rosa college but ultimately decided not to continue because he didn't have enough time between having a job and a family. He does not want to go back to school. He also applied to be a technician at Sonic, but was rejected. He was annoyed that they gave the job to someone less qualified. He said he does not know why they gave the other person the position. (9/21/17, field notes by author, emphasis added)

As seen, Roshan applied for a job in his field and was directly told by employers that his degree from Afghanistan would not suffice; they wanted him to have a degree from the United States.

This fulfills the theory of blocked mobility in that this participant could not secure a job because his academic degree was not recognized by the host country.

However, though Roshan is the only informant who explicitly provided information that proves the theory of blocked mobility to be true, many other informants mentioned that they turned to the ridesharing occupation because their English skills were insufficient for other work. While this absolutely fits in the framework of blocked mobility, it is unknown whether or not they could get other jobs if they did not try. Either they merely perceived their English skills to be insufficient and this prevented them from applying for other jobs, or they were told by employers that their English level was insufficient, and they did not provide this information to me. In regards to the drivers who had a Bachelor's or Master's degree, they did not divulge to me that their degree was unrecognized by employers here. Instead, they saw their insufficient English skills as the reason why they had to turn to ridesharing.

Given that drivers immensely enjoyed a few things about the occupation; a flexible schedule, relatively high-earnings, etc, and at the same time expressed preference to be working

in another field, it can be concluded that these drivers felt that ridesharing was the best occupation they could get *of jobs not in their preferred field*. While there are other jobs in the Bay Area that do not require advanced English skills or an academic degree, like domestic work, dishwashing, or jobs of this sort that tend to employ minorities, they do not provide the flexibility of hours or immediate financial opportunity that drivers saw ridesharing to provide. And so it seems that the ridesharing occupation is, in a sense, an opportunity for immigrants in a system where they have little job choice.

I use the word ‘opportunity’ here loosely; while ridesharing does provide these drivers a chance to earn money with a flexible schedule, I wonder if it truly provides a) sufficient primary-income earnings at b) as low of a cost as they believe.

The majority of drivers brought in around \$35-40,000 each year after taxes when driving full-time. In a city where \$105,000 is now considered low-income for a family<sup>55</sup>, \$35,000 is near-poverty for these drivers<sup>56</sup>, of whom nine did support a family. To highlight, ridesharing was the primary source of income for most of the drivers.

There are a myriad of expenses for ridesharing drivers, and it is important to remember that many of these expenses were covered for their taxi-driving brethren prior to the restructuring of the industry. Ridesharing drivers are not reimbursed for driving expenses like gas, depreciation of their car, or insurance. These costs do vary from driver to driver, and according to Hall and Krueger’s paper on Uber drivers in the United States, “drivers may be able to partially offset their costs by deducting work-related expenses from their income for tax

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<sup>55</sup> Bloom, Ester. "Here's How Much You Have to Make to be Considered 'Low Income' in San Francisco." CNBC 2017.

<sup>56</sup> Sciacca, Annie. "In Costly Bay Area, Even Six-Figure Salaries are Considered ‘Low Income’." The Mercury News 2017.

purposes, including depreciation and/or leasing fees depending on their particular tax situation.”

<sup>57</sup> Not one of the drivers divulged to me this was the case for them. The cost of gas, wear-and-tear, and insurance are significant, and the toll that driving takes on physical health, including the inability to access restrooms easily, should all be taken into account.

## **Conclusion**

This study has provided the first analysis of migrant ridesharing drivers in San Francisco using a sample of 14 male participants. The information was gathered using semi-structured interviews, an online questionnaire, and participant observation, and framed in the context of the blocked mobility theory.

The participants in the study ranged in age from 22 to 68 years old. All of the participants were male, which was by happenstance and confirmed previous reports stating that most ridesharing drivers are male. The participants hailed from a variety of countries, including Afghanistan, Iran, China, Taiwan, Brazil, Venezuela, Sri Lanka, India, Nepal, and Russia. They had been in the United States from two to an estimated 50 years, and their highest academic degrees ranged from high school diplomas to Master’s degrees. Finally, nine out of the 14 supported a family.

The majority of participants came to the United States as economic migrants. Other migration pathways included coming as a refugee, unaccompanied minor, diversity lottery recipient, cyclical migrant, and Special Immigrant Visa grantee. When they arrived to the U.S.,

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<sup>57</sup> Hall, Jonathan and Alan Krueger. *An Analysis of the Labor Market for Uber’s Driver-Partners in the United States*: Princeton University, 2015.

their occupations ranged in skill level, with some working as busboys or gas station attendants, and others as engineers and realtors. The majority, by only a slim margin, worked low-skilled jobs before arriving to the ridesharing industry. The level of English language skill was also evenly split across the group, with half having intermediate speaking skills or less, and half above intermediate skills. None of the drivers proffered that they did not get or that they lost a job because their English skills were insufficient. Rather, it seems that their own perception of their language skills being insufficient stopped them from applying to other jobs in the first place. One of the 14 drivers did express, however, that he was told by employers that he did not get a job because they did not recognize his home country's academic degree, and wanted him to have an American one.

Ridesharing provides a great deal of flexibility to its drivers, which was given as the number one reason drivers in this study chose this occupation. High earnings and ease of entry were the subsequent most common responses. However, nearly all of the drivers expressed that they would have preferred to be working in another field, but could not do so due to insufficient English skills, lack of recognition of their academic degree, or personal issues such as financial capital or family matters. Therefore, it can be concluded that the driver-participants in this study saw the ridesharing occupation as their best option in a labor market unsuited for them.

In regards to the high financial prospect many drivers saw ridesharing to provide, the annual income most shared with me was unsuitable for supporting a family in the San Francisco area. Instead, it seems that the compensation for ridesharing, after taking into account the expenses of the occupation, is only high when considering the extremely low cost of entering. There is no interview necessary, and all one needs is a car and a driver's license.

Whether ridesharing is “slavery”<sup>58</sup> or opportunity is up to the driver. For the highly-educated participants with a past of high-skilled occupations, ridesharing was something they had to resort to because they were unable to reach their preferred field. For the drivers who were less educated and had a history of low-skilled jobs, ridesharing was an opportunity to earn more than they could otherwise, with a schedule they got to set themselves.

### **Limitations**

There were several challenges in conducting this study. The first and greatest obstacle was finding participants in the limited time available. When the methodology was changed to interviewing the drivers in their cars while I rode as a passenger, the issue then transformed into fitting an in-depth interview in the short time available between my pick-up and drop-off point. Ideally, interviews would have lasted at least 30 minutes, but limited financial resources on my part prevented me from being able to take longer rides. In the future, an incentive could be given for drivers to meet for interviews at a designated time and place.

With semi-structured interviews, the freedom of discussion resulted in an imbalance in information gleaned; not all interviews consisted of the same exact questions. With some drivers, we talked more about their labor history in the United States, while others wished to share more about their views on ridesharing. With this being the first study on migrant ridesharing drivers, I allowed the drivers to speak freely due to the study’s exploratory nature. In the future, more systematic, narrow questions could be asked depending on the focus; be it the sharing economy, unionized workers vs. independent contractors, city transportation design, etc.

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<sup>58</sup> See Gabriel’s excerpt, page 39



At times, I encountered drivers with such limited English language capabilities that we were unable to have an interview. As a second attempt, I gave these drivers my business card with the link to the online questionnaire, but even if they did visit it, they were most likely unable to understand the questions anyway. With no translator, these drivers disappeared off the radar of potential study participants. This was a significant loss, because if the blocked mobility theory essentially posits that migrants do not get jobs because of low English skills, then drivers who could not speak English well would be prime study participants.

In conclusion, a more thorough test of the blocked mobility theory would be to ask not only each participant about the job interviews they went through in the United States, but also to ask each employer why they did not give the participant that job. Of course, this information is extremely difficult to obtain for a variety of reasons, and falls beyond the scope of this study. This study instead serves as a nuanced, exploratory jumping-off point for future research into migrants who drive for ridesharing companies.

## Appendices

### Interview Sample Questions

1. What brought you to the U.S.?
2. What were your main reasons for migrating to the US?
3. Take me through your labor history from when you arrived in the U.S.
4. What employment choices did you feel were available to you when you arrived?
5. How did you become a driver? Why?
6. How did you learn about ridesharing?
7. What was the on-boarding process?
8. How many hours per week do you drive?
9. Did you have to do an interview?
10. What other job options did you have, if any?
11. Was ridesharing your best option?
12. Was it the only option?
13. Why did you choose ridesharing over taxi driving?
14. What are the advantages/disadvantages of being a driver?
15. How long do you see yourself driving for (Uber/Lyft) ?
16. How did you learn English?
17. Were you schooled in English your home country?
18. Was your first exposure to English when you arrived?
19. Did you take any English classes here for adult learners?
20. What role do you think your English language ability played in your job opportunities?
21. How has your language level affected your job experience?
22. What role do you think your gender/race/religion has played in your experience as a driver? (ask each identity separately)
23. Would you recommend this occupation to others?
24. What do you estimate is your income from ridesharing?
25. Do you have any other jobs or responsibilities?
26. If yes, what makes you take on more than one job?
27. What kind of job would you like to have here if you weren't in the rideshare industry?
28. What is your family's immigration pathway to the United States?

29. Is your household dual income? If so, what is your partner's occupation?
30. Approx how much income does your partner contribute to the household annually?
31. What is your approx annual income?
32. What is your approx annual income from ridesharing/driving?
34. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience in the ridesharing industry in the Bay Area?

## Online Questionnaire

1. What was your occupation in your home country?
2. How did you hear about ridesharing?
3. How far do you commute from your home to where you usually conduct ridesharing?
4. How long have you been a ridesharing driver?
5. Do you have friends who drive for Uber/Lyft?
6. Do you have other job opportunities at the present moment?
7. Is English your first language?
8. When did you start learning English?
9. What other job options did you have when you chose to drive for Uber/Lyft?
10. Do you have an additional job?
  - a. If Yes, what is your other job?
11. Do you enjoy driving?
12. What do you enjoy about ridesharing?
13. What do you dislike about ridesharing?
14. Is there another job you would rather have?
  - a. If Yes, what job?
15. What is your nationality? Race? Religion? Gender?
16. How old are you?
17. Do you have children?
  - a. If Yes, how many? Do they live with you?
18. What is the highest level of education you've completed?
19. Is your household dual income? If so, what is your partner's occupation?
20. Approx how much income does your partner contribute to the household annually?
21. How many years have you lived in the United States?
  - a. In the Bay Area?

## Strongly Disagree - Strongly Agree

22. I chose to drive for Uber/Lyft because I wanted to be a driver.
23. I am satisfied with my job.
24. I chose to drive for Uber/Lyft because of the flexible hours.
25. I chose to drive for Uber/Lyft because the money is good.
26. I chose to drive for Uber/Lyft because there were no other options.
27. I feel safe driving for Uber/Lyft.
28. I want to continue being a driver in the future.  
I want to change my job.

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